

The Forest Service Role In San Diego County

The Cleveland National Forest is a land management agency with a wildland fire department with 17 fire stations, a Fire Lookout Tower, two district offices and the forest headquarters in San Diego County. The fire department fields 18 front line engines (type 3), two reserve engines, 6 patrol (type 4 engines) units, two water tenders, two hotshot crews, 10 fire prevention personnel and a medium helicopter within the county. A 2000 gallon helitanker, 10 additional engines and an additional hotshot crew are stationed in nearby Orange and Riverside Counties.

Stations are fully staffed during the period May 15-Dec 15th annually as statistically, this is when most serious fires occur. Only 4-8 stations are staffed during the remainder of the year, except during periods of high winds or other periods of high fire danger. During the peak of fire season, there are 216 Forest Service firefighters assigned to the San Diego County portion of the Cleveland National Forest. Staffing levels during the winter months are typically less than 50 percent of that number.

Medical aids, vehicle fires and hazmat are not part of the Forest Service mission, but agency personnel are trained and experienced in dealing with these emergencies based on the closest resource concept and “the good Samaritan Law”. Medical Aid and HazMat training are performed at the “First Responder level.” This policy is currently under review in Washington D.C.

During large fire scenarios, the agency is capable of bringing in large numbers of aircraft, dozers, engines and crews to support fire suppression within the county. The agency also provides both national and regional Incident Management Teams for wildfires on federal lands or for all risk incidents when requested by FEMA. The jointly staffed Ramona Air Tanker Base and the Monte Vista Interagency Emergency Communications Center are examples of the close relationship between CAL FIRE and the Forest Service in San Diego County. Cleveland N.F. resources respond to incidents throughout the county on SRA lands at the request of CAL FIRE.

The Cleveland N.F. also has agreements with the Camp Pendleton Fire Department, the City of San Diego and many other municipal and tribal fire departments that allows these federal firefighters to operate as part of a

regional mutual aid system which includes both fire suppression, fire prevention, and move-up and cover functions. Pre-existing agreements that described payment of services and free mutual aid requirements are a prerequisite for operating under the existing mutual aid system.

For over 40 years, the Cleveland N.F. has sponsored live fire drills at Camp Pendleton on an interagency basis with thousands of San Diego County firefighters having participated over the years.